

# The growth of emergency food provision to children

**In 2016/17, Trussell Trust food banks provided 436,938 food parcels to children. The increasing use of food projects by children, together with evidence on the rising levels of food insecurity, has drawn attention to the level of hunger experienced by families with children across the UK.<sup>1</sup> Hannah Lambie-Mumford reviews the research and suggests what the policy response should be.**

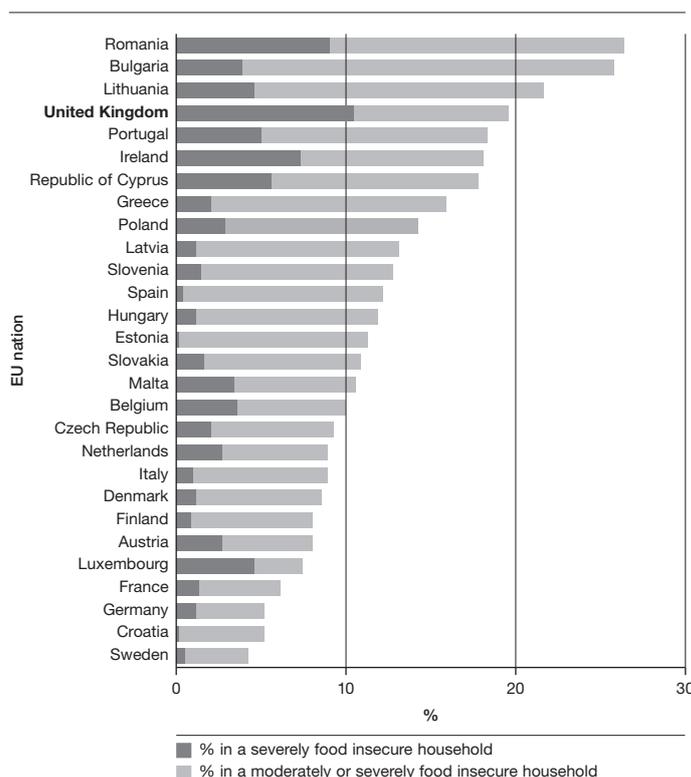
**R**ECENT FIGURES from Unicef indicate that there are significant levels of food insecurity in households with children: 19 per cent of UK children under the age of 15 live with a respondent who is moderately or severely food insecure, and 10.4 per cent (the highest proportion anywhere in Europe) live with someone who is severely food insecure.<sup>2</sup>

Within this context, we have also seen the proliferation of charitable emergency food provision to children – both directly through school and holiday feeding projects, and through food parcel provision by food banks to their families. Between 2012/13 and 2013/14, The Trussell Trust food bank provision to children rose by 252 per cent in absolute terms.<sup>3</sup> This remains the single biggest annual increase in provision to children, notable for its link to the implementation of welfare reforms. Since then, provision has risen by a further 69 per cent, and in 2016/17 The Trussell Trust food banks provided 436,938 food parcels to children.<sup>4</sup> Research also suggests that food banks play a particularly significant role in areas where childhood deprivation is high.<sup>5</sup> Households with children, and particularly large families and lone-parent families, are especially vulnerable to food bank use.<sup>6</sup>

Breakfast clubs, holiday clubs and other projects designed to feed ‘hungry’ children have also expanded across the country to meet perceived need in local communities. In 2014, a survey conducted by the Association of Public Service estimated that there had been a 45 per cent increase in breakfast club provision since 2008.<sup>7</sup> Today, breakfast clubs run by Magic Breakfast and Greggs report feeding 57,000

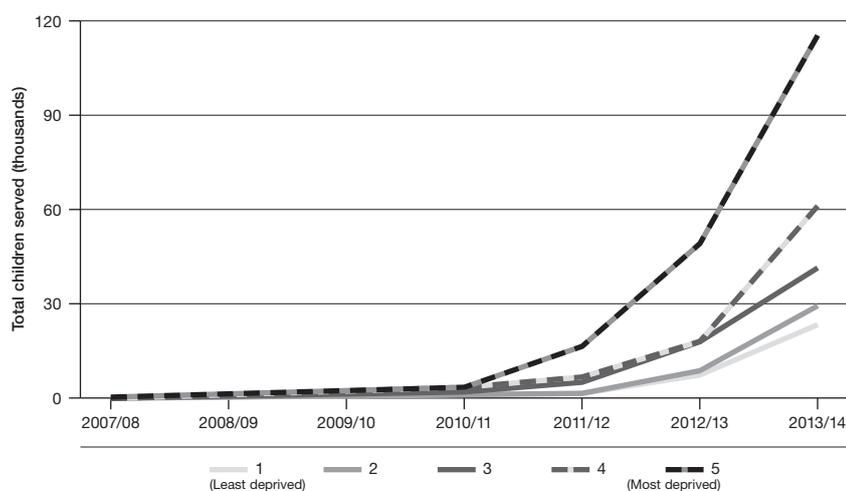
Figure 1:

## Percentage of children under 15 living in a food insecure household



Source: <http://foodfoundation.org.uk/new-evidence-of-child-food-insecurity-in-the-uk/>

Figure 2: **Changes in foodbank provision for children split by the quintile of deprivation level: total number of children served**



Source: H Lambie-Mumford and M Green, 'Austerity, welfare reform and the rising use of food banks by children in England and Wales', *Area*, 49(3), Wiley, 2015

a concerning development and poses an urgent problem which will require comprehensive social policy responses.

### The growth of food charity

The high level of food insecurity in households with children and the increasing use of food projects by children reflect significant shifts in poverty policy framings and corresponding policy programmes in recent years. In particular, policy approaches to child poverty have shifted the focus away from children themselves and structural determinants of poverty – especially income – towards the family unit and behavioural interpretations centred around the notion of individualised dysfunction.<sup>17</sup>

It is becoming apparent that the rise of charitable food assistance to children and families is linked to the changes to rights and entitlements which have formed a key part of the social policy platform during the last seven years. Evidence increasingly suggests that public finance austerity and welfare reforms have had an important role to play, particularly in driving up food bank use.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, the ongoing and future reforms are projected to continue to hit families with children especially hard, and food insecurity levels are likely to remain steady or increase.<sup>19</sup>

children, and clubs run by Kelloggs distribute two million breakfasts, each year. Less is known about holiday hunger initiatives – designed to alleviate out-of-term time hunger among children who are eligible for free school meals – but Forsey indicates that as many as 428 may be in existence.<sup>8</sup>

Breakfast clubs have received government funding since 1999, when the Department of Health funded a pilot programme.<sup>9</sup> The Welsh government has funded provision since 2004,<sup>10</sup> putting the provision into legislation in 2013. Also in this decade there have been commitments of government funding as part of the Child Poverty Strategy<sup>11</sup> and the commitment to use the UK's share of the European Union's most deprived persons funds (£3.15 million in 2013/14<sup>12</sup>) to fund breakfast club provision along with £10 million from the sugary drinks levy.<sup>13</sup> While there has been no central government funding of holiday hunger programmes, the Welsh government announced £500,000 of funding for projects in 2017<sup>14</sup> and local authorities have provided grants in the past.<sup>15</sup>

The evidence base on food bank provision to children is still emerging, but studies like Loopstra and Lalor's provide important steps forward in our knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Research on breakfast clubs and holiday hunger provision is, however, patchy. The available research is not yet comprehensive and we cannot say with any authority that we have a robust and rigorous insight into the scale, nature and outcomes of these kinds of provision. But, from the evidence we do have, the increase in ad hoc provision of food assistance to children and their families is

There is a long history of food security research in other countries, which makes similar links to social policy shifts and the loss of rights and entitlements to welfare provision.<sup>20</sup> This kind of framework enables us to focus on the importance of adequate social protection and entitlement on the one hand, and experiences of food insecurity and food charity on the other.

The apparent shift from state-based entitlements to reliance on charitable projects helping people in need raises urgent questions about the future of social policy. Central to these questions are the critiques which can be made about charitable food assistance. The first is universality. Food charity is neither a population-wide response nor – critically – an entitlement. Furthermore, there are questions of accessibility regarding how access to food charity is managed, as well as the charity's accessibility and the thresholds it sets out when access is granted. The social injustice of food charity and experiences of embarrassment and stigma felt by recipients of food charity are also important.

There are also questions about its efficacy in preventing food insecurity and enabling food access. In the first instance, charitable initiatives provide relief from the symptoms of food insecurity. But while they may (when designed

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and managed appropriately) alleviate experiences of hunger, they are necessarily unable to address its underlying drivers. Finally, there is the question of how far food charity may mask state accountability and responsibility. The ways in which this kind of charity may enable states to ‘look the other way’<sup>21</sup> could be detrimental to ensuring that states act. A further critique can be levelled at so-called ‘feeding’ initiatives, such as breakfast and holiday hunger clubs. Such provision takes children out of their family setting and does not address ‘the root cause of the problem of family food insecurity’.<sup>22</sup>

Such critiques highlight the problem of relying on charitable food provision in the wake of reduced social entitlements. They draw our attention to the vulnerability of these kinds of provision, and the precariousness of people’s access to it when they are in need.

### Moving forward

As we contemplate the best policy responses to pursue in the face of food insecurity and increasing use of charitable provision by children and their families, it is going to be essential that our thinking is broad and ambitious, and that it challenges contemporary minimalist tendencies in both understanding and responding to poverty and hunger. In particular, broader conceptualisations and definitions of the problem of food insecurity will be needed to emphasise the importance of not only dietary intake, but also the experience of acquiring food and the sustainability of those acquisition sources in the future. These definitions<sup>23</sup> emphasise social acceptability and social inclusion, highlighting the important role food experiences have in shaping lived realities of exclusion and isolation. Similarly, the way in which the need for emergency food provision is understood – often in terms of ‘crisis’ – should also be located within a wider understanding. Notions of crisis should be situated within a wider appreciation of the underpinning complexity and precarity of household experiences of food insecurity and poverty, and incorporate notions of mild and moderate levels of food insecurity.

Responses to food insecurity should also avoid minimalism. Instead of focusing on minimum nutrients, food or incomes, they should take into account social justice, inclusion and participation. Adequate responses to help people fulfil basic food needs are vital, but wider progressive responses are also necessary to realise everyone’s participation in socially accepted food experiences, and enjoy food’s facilitative social role. Responses to food insecurity need to be ambitious and inclusive of all

stakeholders; they should strive not only to relieve – or even solve – food insecurity, but also for equitable and just food experiences that are secure into the future. ■

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- 7 See [http://www.kelloggs.co.uk/content/dam/newton/images/masterbrand/UK/R5\\_Kelloggs%20Breakfast%20Club%20Audit%20OAPSE.pdf](http://www.kelloggs.co.uk/content/dam/newton/images/masterbrand/UK/R5_Kelloggs%20Breakfast%20Club%20Audit%20OAPSE.pdf).
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**The increasing use of food projects by children reflect significant shifts in poverty policy**

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